


Policy knowledge production in de-democratizing contexts

Andrea Krizsán ¹, Katarzyna Jezierska², Adrienne Sörbom³

¹Department of Public Policy, Central European University, Austria-Hungary

²Division of Urban Planning and Development, University West, Trollhättan, Sweden

³School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden

Corresponding author: A. Krizsán, Department of Public Policy, Central European University, Quellenstrasse 51, Budapest, Wien 1100, Austria. Email: krizsana@ceu.edu

Abstract

In an era of post-truth, the legitimacy of policy knowledge is questioned, especially in de-democratizing contexts where governments purposefully engage in post-truth politics to support their regimes. In such contexts, technocratic evidence-based policymaking is undermined, and the role played by policy advice changes. Recognizing the significance of political contextual factors that might differ across de-democratizing contexts, we analyzed how changes in policymaking and public administration in de-democratization contexts impact policy advice, focusing on think tanks in two de-democratizing countries of the European Union: Hungary and Poland. We identify four aspects of policymaking that are particularly consequential for the role of think tanks and the knowledge they produce in policymaking processes: questioning and politicizing expertise, centralizing policymaking, politicizing public administration, and dismantling accountability mechanisms. We argue that changes in policymaking along these four aspects are conducive to a controlled policy advice system, favoring short-term policy advice aligned with government ideology, while marginalizing and excluding the actors and knowledge that do not align. Our research, along with other literature on knowledge regimes in consolidated autocracies, suggests that control in these European Union-based contexts is not complete, and the think tank field continues to be characterized by diversity, particularly contestation and polarization between those who are aligned with the regime and those who oppose it. We substantiate our claims using an original interview dataset on think tanks in Hungary and Poland.

Keywords: de-democratization; Central and Eastern Europe; think tanks; policy advice

Current tendencies of de-democratization (Boese et al., 2022), including attacks on critical civil society (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Christensen & Weinstein, 2013), polarization of politics and society (McCoy et al., 2018), and post-truth undermining of knowledge and expertise (Fischer, 2019; Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Hernando et al., 2018), fundamentally reshape policy processes (Bauer et al., 2021) and the place of policy expertise in them. Think tanks stand at the crossroads of several of these tendencies. In Westminster models, think tanks as external policy knowledge producers claim independence beyond party and political lines in their activities (Jezierska, 2018; Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021) and are assumed to contribute to fact-based policymaking and even to government accountability (e.g.,

© The Author(s) 2025. Published by Oxford University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.

Lindquist, 1993; Fraussen & Halpin, 2017; Weaver, 1989). However, scholars also point out that think tanks sometimes advance particular interests and causes (Abelson, 2002; Lindquist, 2021; Rich, 2004; Stone, 2013), especially in contexts where knowledge is politicized along ideological lines, and policy processes are controlled by centralized autocratic states (Axyonova, 2024; Bacon, 2018; Khmel'nitskaya, 2021; Köllner et al., 2018; Menegazzi, 2021; Zhang, 2021; Zhu, 2009). Think tanks are exemplary actors for studying what happens to knowledge and policy expertise in de-democratizing policy contexts, i.e., those moving toward authoritarian solutions.

This paper answers the call for more analyses of policy advisory systems (PASs) beyond the context of consolidated democracies (Howlett, 2019), particularly the need for further analysis of the specifics of the political demand side (Manwaring, 2019), as well as the distinctive logic of policymaking in de-democratizing contexts (Bauer et al., 2021). It contributes to the emerging literature on policy knowledge production and think tanks in eroding democracies (Axyonova, 2024; Bacon, 2018; Bakir, 2023; Djordjevic & Stone, 2023; Hayward, 2018; Khmel'nitskaya, 2021; Köllner et al., 2018; Menegazzi, 2021; Zhang, 2021; Zhu, 2009) by analyzing two extreme cases of de-democratization within the European Union (EU): Hungary and Poland. We bring together scholarship on de-democratization and policy studies to ask how de-democratization affects the role of external policy advice in policy processes.

Our empirical analysis focuses on think tanks in Hungary and Poland, building on a database of 53 semistructured interviews with think tank representatives. While the extent of their democratic backsliding varies (Hajnal et al., 2021), Hungary and Poland have remarkable similarities in patterns of backsliding and changes in policymaking. Existing accounts discuss changes in terms of de-democratizing governments applying an “illiberal governance playbook” (Pirro & Stanley, 2021), breaking, bending, and forging liberal democratic modes of policymaking while serving their own populist and autocratizing goals (Pierre et al., 2021). These “autocratic legalists” (Scheppelle, 2018) subordinate law and expertise to autocratic political decisions, while maintaining the facade of rule of law, democratic accountability, and facts-based policymaking. Hungary and Poland are notorious examples of pernicious polarization (McCoy et al., 2018) and extreme cases of backsliding within the European context, but neither can be considered a consolidated or closed autocracy. Rather, processes of autocratization are underway. A distinctive feature of these countries and their think tanks is their embeddedness in the highly networked and interdependent transnational EU knowledge regime.

We use an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), developing our theoretical propositions by moving back and forth between the literature and our data. We theorize the demand side of policy advice systems in backsliding contexts and the consequences for external policy advice, proposing a conceptual framework for further testing in other faltering democracies. While the two cases allow us to analyze how the role of external policy advice changes in contexts of de-democratization more generally, their contextual embeddedness needs to be considered (Köllner et al., 2018). We argue that four specific aspects of policymaking in de-democratizing contexts influence the dynamics of external policy advice: decreased legitimacy and politicization of expert knowledge; movement toward a centralized, top-down policy process; politicization of norms and procedures governing public administration; and dismantling of government accountability mechanisms. Jointly, these processes contribute to high government control over policy advice dynamics (Craft & Halligan, 2017). In the emerging PAS of Hungary and Poland, ideology and loyalty to the government become the relevant dividing lines rather than the distinction between external and internal policy advice (Vesely, 2013).

The paper proceeds as follows. We briefly discuss the literature on policy advice and explain our theoretical entry point. We then explain our methods and data and provide a background to de-democratization in our two cases. In our Findings section, following abductive logic, we analyze policy advice in de-democratizing contexts, drawing on our empirical data and relevant literature. We conclude by discussing our conceptual contributions to the literature and suggesting future research directions.

Policy advice in de-democratizing regimes

Research on policy advice in consolidated democracies is highly developed (Howlett, 2019; Manwaring, 2019). It moves beyond looking at policy advice actors individually to their constellations in PAS, where policy knowledge production is determined not only by the analytic capacity of policy advisers but also by the demand side: the policy capacity and control of states, and ultimately by the interaction between states and policy advisers (Craft & Halligan, 2017; Halligan, 1995; Howlett, 2019).

Think tanks are key external policy advice actors. Their position at the intersection of politics, market, academia, and civil society allows them to intervene in policymaking in multifaceted ways (Medvetz, 2012; Stone, 2013), primarily contributing substantive, long-term/anticipatory (Craft & Halligan, 2017) and strategic policy advice (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017). As external policy advice actors, they are vulnerable to changes in demand and to the power and discretion of decision-makers (Craft & Halligan, 2017). This makes think tanks particularly interesting subjects for analyzing policy advice under conditions of de-democratization.

It is crucial to understand the logics of policy advice and policy knowledge production beyond consolidated democracies (Howlett, 2019; Hustedt, 2019). In contexts of de-democratization, the demand side becomes particularly important for shaping dynamics in the field (Manwaring, 2019). Political control over who has access to decision-making and what expertise counts is fundamental in such regimes. In contrast to the Westminster model, ideological alignment and loyalty are more important than the location of policy advisers (Craft & Halligan, 2017), and externalization of expertise may not serve independence (Vesely, 2013) but foster corruption. Building on a comprehensive review of literature, Bakir (2023, p. 430) notes a vicious circle of authoritarian PAS in which autocratic governments exercise control over knowledge producers, i.e., speaking power to truth, while knowledge actors fail to speak truth to power due to co-optation. Ample research confirms that nondemocratic, “politically embedded knowledge regimes” (Zhu, 2020) control what policy advice is allowed and who can provide advice and under what conditions. This literature focuses on closed authoritarian contexts and showcases the shrinking space for external policy advice and its streamlining toward government support. Other authors, however, point to the continued existence of some think tank diversity, of nonaligned voices or “civil” think tanks (Hayward, 2018), and contestation within the think tank field (Bacon, 2018; Djordjevic & Stone, 2023; Hayward, 2018; Menegazzi, 2021). Variation between think tank fields in nondemocratic contexts is highly contextual and depends on political contextual factors at the levels of regimes, transnational embeddedness, and even individual leaders (Köllner et al., 2018). The observation of persistent contestation in the think tank field in autocracies aligns with recent findings on civil society in de-democratizing contexts, documenting not only the shrinking civic space (Christensen & Weinstein, 2013; Poppe & Wolff, 2017) but also its reconfiguration, entailing a transfer of resources from critical to aligned civil society groups and continued contestation (Toepler et al., 2020).

Analyses of think tanks in European de-democratizing states distinguish between consequences of de-democratization for government-aligned think tanks serving as ideational resources for the government (Buzogány & Varga, 2018) and think tanks opposing the government that are moving closer to critical civil society, acting as advocates for democracy, and agents of accountability (Jeziarska, 2023). Polarization in contexts of de-democratization thus encompasses knowledge regimes, making think tanks not only objects of polarization but potentially also agents (Jeziarska, et al., 2024).

Research on modes of governance and policymaking in de-democratizing regimes, including changes in bureaucratic structures, the policy cycle, and policy advice, is relatively scarce (Bartha et al., 2020; Batory & Svensson, 2019; Hajnal & Boda, 2021). In a rare systematic examination of public administration and de-democratization, Bauer et al. (2021) argue such regimes reshape policymaking and bureaucracies in ways that fit their policy objectives. Autocratizing governments use different strategies to do so (Bauer et al., 2021), targeting structures, resource allocation, personnel, norms, and accountability mechanisms. Their strategies are rarely unified across all policy fields (Pierre et al., 2021). More changes occur in highly salient fields, leaving “technocratic” fields less affected. Similarly, reliance on external expertise can vary depending on the policy fields (Craft & Wilder, 2017). Salient policy areas in such contexts become ideological battlefields and are highly politicized, with increasing controversiality, widening audience, and further polarization (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012).

Method

We use an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to analyze the demand side of PAS in two de-democratizing countries: Hungary and Poland.¹ Rather than offering a comparative analysis,

¹ Before their autocratic turns, 2010 in Hungary and 2015 Poland, both countries were considered “consolidated liberal democracies” (Ekiert et al., 2007). By 2021, Hungary backslid to “electoral autocracy” and Poland to “electoral democracy” (Boese et al., 2022). In October 2023, the parties that had been de-democratizing Poland since 2015 lost elections, and a process of re-democratization started under the new government. Our analysis focuses only on Poland’s de-democratizing period before the 2023 elections.

we use data from these two cases to extrapolate a conceptual framework for studies on PAS in de-democratizing contexts. We do not thoroughly analyze de-democratization as such but combine the literature with narratives of what is perceived by think tanks themselves as transformations of the broader field of policy advice. While our analysis indirectly touches on how think tanks respond and how the field changes, we focus on changes in the demand side of PAS through the lens of think tanks. We suggest that the four patterns identified in our analysis and their interaction reflect more general trends in public administration and policymaking consequential for PAS in de-democratizing states.

Hungary and Poland are frequently analyzed de-democratizing countries in Europe. Even before de-democratization started, their public administrations were politicized to some extent, with weak capacity and poor expertise (Hajnal & Boda, 2021; Mazur, 2021), but public administration and policy-making were thoroughly transformed after the 2010 (Hungary)/2015 (Poland) political turn. The main changes entailed pervasive replacement of top civil servants with politicized appointments, fast-paced and highly centralized decision-making, and truncated accountability mechanisms such as referenda and consultations, now including pseudo civil society groups (Batory & Svensson, 2019). Policy advice often comes from friends and consiglieri without formal positions, and governments create and finance a circle of old and new loyal organizations (Hajnal & Boda, 2021; Mazur, 2021).

We define think tanks in an inclusive way as actors who produce policy relevant analysis and attempt to influence policymaking (Jeziarska and Sörbom, 2021; Garsten and Sörbom, 2023)² through policy advice and sometimes advocacy. They have a propensity to connect with actors from various fields in the interest of policy knowledge production. Although they often mimic academia (Jeziarska and Sörbom, 2021), their results seldom appear in academic peer-review publishing. Instead, they draw upon these results as policy advisers and may exert a substantive influence over the policy agenda and framing of policy issues. This means that the organization and operation of think tanks and the field they constitute are susceptible to the political context in which they exist (Campbell & Pedersen, 2015).

Our data on all think tanks in Hungary (70) and Poland (68) include data on size (staff and budget), date of foundation, location, and main profile. In addition to more traditional think tanks, we included government-affiliated policy institutes, advocacy organizations with a strong research profile, and organizations conducting policy relevant research but situating themselves closer to the media field. For the interviews, we strategically selected a diverse sample of these think tanks, 17 in Hungary and 24 in Poland. Interviewed think tanks varied in their organizational structures, ideological positioning (from left to right, antigovernment/progovernment), and issue area specialization (Appendix 1).

We conducted 53 semistructured interviews with representatives of these think tanks in two rounds between 2020 and 2022.³ The interviews followed a common interview guide and centered on policy influence, relations with other social actors, and changes after 2010/2015. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and manually coded with the help of NVivo. According to the informed consent agreements, the interviews were anonymized, but to increase transparency, we indicate whether direct quotations come from Hungary or Poland.

Using an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), we developed coding by going back and forth between our data and earlier research. We identified four aspects of how policy advice systems, particularly their demand side, were altered after the political turn in 2010/2015. These aspects provide the basis for our conceptual framework and analysis. Our analysis includes perspectives of think tanks on both sides of the political divide: some opposing the illiberal governments and some supporting them. We note these differences in positionality where relevant.

Findings

We identified four aspects of policymaking in the context of de-democratization, which shape PAS: questioning and politicizing expertise, centralizing policy processes, politicizing public administration, and dismantling accountability. In what follows, we discuss each separately, combining findings from extant research with an analysis of how these changes were narrated by our Hungarian and Polish think

² Given the disparity in how think tanks are organized, how they operate, and where they are positioned in the sociopolitical space, their definition continues to attract scholarly attention (e.g., E. Lindquist, 2021; Wellstead & Howlett, 2022).

³ The first round of interviews was conducted online in Hungarian or Polish, with one interview in English. Follow-up interviews were conducted in person and in English. For more information on the interviews and examples of coding decisions, see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

tank interviewees, focusing on the consequences for external knowledge producers, specifically their standing in the policy advisory system.

Questioning and politicizing expertise

First and foremost, there is a changing perception of expert knowledge. While this process is visible beyond the context of de-democratization, it gains traction in this context. Recent political developments challenge the link between expertise, knowledge production, and policymaking and hence the connections between think tanks and policy actors (Hernando et al., 2018). As Latour contends:

With the rise of alternative facts, it has become clear that whether or not a statement is believed depends far less on its veracity than on the conditions of its ‘construction’—that is, truth claims are assessed not on the basis of their content, but on who is making them, to whom they are addressed and from which institutions they emerge and are made visible. (Kofman, 2018, p. 1)

These trends connect to the global rise of populism, exacerbated by polarization and democratic decline (Fischer, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018). Governments resorting to a mix of populist, polarizing, and antidemocratic politics use a “politics of disinformation” (Fischer, 2019) to pursue political gains and build “informational autocracies” (Guriev & Treisman, 2020). The prevailing political culture appeals to emotions, rather than facts, when making policy decisions. Populist politics and modes of governance openly question the legitimacy of elites, including experts, to defend and promote popular majoritarian interests (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). To this end, the expertise of established knowledge producers is replaced with “common sense” or “expertise of the people.” However, this anti-elitism may only be a discursive element, as populists in power include selected elites and exclude some nonelites (Enyedi, 2016, p. 10). In this sense, expertise becomes an “empty category that can be filled with a range of identities depending on the social, cultural, and political historical context” (Sunnercrantz & Yildirim, 2022, p. 60). In the de-democratizing context, expertise can denote the despised hegemonic expertise or the alternative, counter-expertise brought in from earlier ill-reputed positions to serve the objectives of the populist project (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021, pp. 60–63).

The interviews revealed two somewhat contradictory tendencies undermining the role and legitimacy of expert knowledge in policy processes. First, the demand for policy advice and expertise is decreasing, affecting all types of think tanks. Second, the remaining demand (albeit decreased) is directed toward think tanks that align ideologically with the government, thus politicizing policy expertise.

While think tanks generally declare expertise and data to be fundamental to policy decisions, most interviewees agreed that in the current context, political rationales and short-term electoral gains take precedence: “Polish politicians don’t value knowledge; they don’t think they need it” (IP11_PL). An interviewee said, “There is a remarkable shift towards a kind of politics-dictated direction, where professional considerations do not even appear, even when they could be compatible with politics” (IP1_HU).

A manifestation of the trend toward questioning expertise is the secrecy around governmental data collection processes. One interviewee said, “Policy is done in the dark” (IP6_PL), as governments restrict provision and generation of data and information. Interviewees referred to the interruption of state-mandated data collection processes (IP9_HU) or said that access to such data has become limited or even blocked (IP7_HU; IP11_HU). They further noted the increased reluctance of state officials and bureaucrats to engage in research and data generation:

The Hungarian decision-making process has been terribly closed off...They do not even attend EU organized professional conferences...They don’t give us interviews when we’re writing something for the EU and we’re supposed to be documenting what the Hungarian situation is. (IP1_HU)

Still, think tank representatives in both countries said that the willingness of governmental bodies to provide information varies; some may occasionally be willing to release data.

The second trend is a move away from the idea of knowledge as impartial and a tendency to reconfigure the field of expertise along ideological lines. Interviewees in both countries said that expert organizations resonant with the government ideology are established and/or strengthened. Those critical of government ideology are excluded and/or marginalized because they are seen as enemies to the

government project, not capable of bringing valuable knowledge. Consequently, the field of external policy advice is government-controlled, with mutually exclusive pockets of knowledge production.

In this context, autonomous or independent knowledge is an oxymoron. Knowledge produced by think tanks is not valued on its own merits but assessed based on the location of think tanks in the bifurcated landscape. In this new PAS configuration, ideologically loyal knowledge producers have a voice, while those who are critical are excluded, their activities undermined and de-legitimized: “Hungarian decision-making preparation has largely become trust-based. So ‘our’ people have the say and everybody else is the enemy” (IP1_HU). Government-aligned think tanks see this as a natural state of affairs: “Obviously, the politician will always go to the organization that he or she trusts to do research or analysis for them or to help them with their work” (IP12_HU).

Illiberal governments contribute to an ideologically driven world of expertise by empowering think tanks linked to their own ideological orientation and systematically excluding others. Dimensions of inclusion/exclusion include access to funding and policymaking processes (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2021). New organizations are established, catering to the government’s needs:

Our alter ego is built on the other side, well these are more GONGOs than NGOs...This new civil society, which is being built at the moment by those currently in power, is being fed in an absolutely incredible way from state budget funds. (IP5_PL)

These new organizations are meant to do the work that older or nonaligned ones will not do—provide servile expertise, or at least legitimation, for government decisions. This tendency is accentuated by closing opportunities for nonaligned think tanks to get contracts from national governments, something confirmed even by progovernment interviewees: “If someone does not agree with the government policy, it is difficult to obtain financing from such an entity” (IP15_PL).

Apart from reconfiguring the think tank landscape through funding, governments, either directly or through their loyal media or institutes, repeatedly launch attacks on antigovernment think tanks and civil society organizations (CSOs). This has consequences for the standing of external policy advice. In Hungary, the most extreme example was the law labeling externally funded CSOs’ foreign agents (LibertiesEU, 2017). No such law exists in Poland, but several campaigns were orchestrated by the government “debunking” certain think tanks and CSOs as having suspicious connections with domestic and foreign liberal elites. In both countries, the attacks did not constitute substantive debate but amounted to “reputation attacks” (IP8_PL). As one interviewee said, “Our professionalism has never been questioned. Whenever we have been attacked by the government, it has always been politically motivated and never targeted our professional activities” (IP14_HU). The aim is to undermine the credibility of oppositional think tanks in the broader society (IP1_HU). This hostile environment impacts organizations and their staff, making critical knowledge production more difficult and symbolically marking the curtailment of external policy advice.

In contrast, government-aligned think tanks enjoy increased support. Right-wing think tanks know that the de-democratizing government is more responsive to them than previous governments: “There is an attitude of listening. We think that in general, the role of experts has increased” (IP16_PL). A Hungarian progovernment think tank representative boasted about the increasing influence:

[The government] takes into account what we say...We have very productive, concrete, very important conversations where we say what the biggest problems are, based on current research or our own experience...So we certainly have an impact. (IP10_HU)

Government appreciation is shown by generosity in funding, and progovernment think tanks flourish:

Under [think tank], there are more than 100 people who work to provide these services...for the whole government...It’s an exaggeration to say they’ve monopolized the market, but they’ve become very big players. It never used to be that such huge sums of money flowed through think-tanks as the government is now pouring. (IP15_HU)

Overall, the interviewees suggested a PAS in which the legitimacy of expertise in general is questioned, and knowledge institutions have been reconfigured from diversity and relative autonomy toward a politically controlled, ideologically validated field, where nonaligned think tanks and the knowledge they produce are seen as hostile and marginalized from governmental policy processes.

Centralizing the policy process

Bauer et al. (2021) see reshaping governance structures, including public administration and budget, as a central strategy of de-democratizing governments. They centralize decision-making and prioritize top-down processes of command at the expense of horizontal dispersion of power and autonomy of lower-level decision-making. As Hajnal and Boda note, “Centralization is not only a formal, top-down process, but also an informal, bottom-up process, in which lower administrative levels abandon the responsibility of making decisions” (Hajnal & Boda, 2021, p. 86). Regrouping resources like funding, personnel, and access to information allows governments to control the structure of public administration by elevating some units while marginalizing others (Bauer et al., 2021). Noncompliant institutions may be side-lined, defunded, or duplicated (Hajnal & Boda, 2021; Mazur, 2021). Centralization and top-down logics give inordinate authority to top-level decision-makers who are politically appointed and thus trusted to make the right ideological decisions. Interviewees in both countries who were critical of the government said centralization of the policy process mean that think tanks’ interventions are more likely to be used to justify already made decisions, not to set agendas or evaluate stages of policymaking, a tendency typical of nondemocratic regimes (Bakir, 2023). Several said that the role of expertise is limited to legitimizing political decisions, serving narrow political gains, whereby progovernment think tanks act as “decision-selling institutes...looking for supporting background material for existing policies” (IP11_HU).

Centralization is underpinned by the fast and sometimes ad hoc nature of policymaking, which leaves little space for external policy advice. Government-critical interviewees said that the overnight mode of introducing new laws and regulations is emblematic of illiberal policymaking: “They are still running as quick as a flash and, in general, people are not able to realize in which legal order they live, because these regulations change so quickly” (IP13_PL). They also said that the extraordinary speed of policymaking has consequences for quality: “Decision-making has become terribly ad hoc and primitive in terms of policy or professionalism” (IP1_HU).

The centralization of policy processes allows close control of access to policymaking, singling out a few “acceptable” organizations. A government-critical Hungarian interviewee said, “There is an incredible centralization of media monitoring, political analysis, policy advice, and public opinion research on the government side” (IP15_HU). Ideological proximity to the government is rewarded by access. However, the privileged position of a think tank does not automatically mean that it is influential:

We carry out research and try to help the Hungarian government...if it wishes,...we also help to inform policy decisions...When we are asked...we prepare a strategic paper for the government or the ministry, we describe in it what models we see abroad...and what we propose in Hungary, what is worth implementing or not. Then, on the basis of this, the government or the relevant ministry decides whether it goes in one direction or another, and they also listen to others. (IP12_HU)

A tendency toward prioritizing in-house expertise is noticeable. In Hungary, “government background institutions” have become a key source for input to the policy process: “We are a background institution of the ministry. This means that we are mostly involved in preparing current policy decisions and measuring the impact of decisions already taken....We are a piece of the machinery” (IP13_HU).

While politically salient sectors and issues follow an exclusionary logic, less salient fields can be more open. As the representative of a liberal Hungarian think tank observed, “Areas that are very politicized are very closed. Others are much more open...If it is not at the center of their policy, then they will perceive criticism as criticism and there is a possibility that they incorporate it” (IP8_HU). A Polish interviewee said, “The more technical a topic, the easier it was to attract them [government officials]” (IP1_PL).

The top-down and fast-tracking of policymaking entails governmental control of pathways for external policy advice, controlled use of expertise produced by think tanks closely aligned with the

government, the use of in-house expertise, and the exclusion of nonaligned think tanks. Government-critical interviewees in Hungary claimed that they were almost totally excluded from policy processes. Polish interviewees identified similar tendencies, albeit to a lesser extent.

Politicizing public administration

Politicization of bureaucracy is a trait of de-democratizing governments (Bakir, 2023; Hajnal & Boda, 2021). Personnel reshuffling is one strategy for changing public administration to serve government objectives. Recruitment and career progression decisions are subordinated to a logic of patronage and ideological screening instead of meritocracy, thus “completely committing the administrative culture to the new ideological order by undermining the official neutrality of the bureaucracy” (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 14) and encouraging a servient and mechanical public administration that will fear making informal access available for external expertise. This is all the more important because next to formal professional relations, informal personalized access is critical to think tanks as policy advisers (Stone, 2013), especially in postcommunist policymaking environments (Hajnal & Boda, 2021, p. 82).

With the politicization of relations, it has become harder for think tanks to connect with government. Both pro- and antigovernment interviewees reflected on the importance of personal relations: “Personal relations in general have a huge influence in Poland, including Polish think-tanks, on the way organizations, institutions and such like operate” (IP11_PL). A progovernment Hungarian interviewee recalled times when personal relations trumped ideological orientation: “It didn’t really matter if you were Századvég or Political Capital. Back then, they absolutely worked, and the personal relationships were very different” (IP14_HU). Personal connections are crucial:

In bureaucracy in general,...you have to find the right person first...So it is very important to find someone who you have already convinced, someone who likes me personally and thinks our subject is a good one,...this personal contact is very important, where there is none, all attempts are bound to be in vain. (IP10_HU)

Government-critical interviewees said that politicization reaches to lower tiers, where new standards of loyalty and compliance are established. These standards are paired with self-imposed servility of bureaucrats. A Polish liberal said:

It means that this, so to speak, ‘fight’ is getting worse along with the progress of construction of a ‘Law and Justice state.’ So, these officials are more and more, I would say, frightened. And they are reluctant to go beyond their comfort zone, where the situation is predictable, and nobody will ask them difficult questions. (IP1_PL)

For nonaligned think tanks, the replacement of bureaucrats and/or the self-imposed restraint mean that personalized entry points have been reduced or even blocked: “There were some connections...but now they completely died. Even our informal connections. In the beginning, I personally had university classmates in ministries or right-wing analysis institutes” (IP14_HU). Government-critical interviewees said that civil society had been attacked, leading to a closure of relations at all levels: “They slowly made this anti-human rights, anti-civil society communication so powerful that it was very difficult to maintain this professional dialogue even at the lower level” (IP5_HU). The only feasible meetings seem to be those set up in secret, following Chatham House rules (IP8_HU; IP8_PL). A liberal Hungarian interviewee said that relations with the government are deliberately obscured: “They send over materials informally now to give our opinion, but secretly. They send it over, we give our opinion, but nothing in the file will indicate that we talked about it” (IP5_HU).

Thus, ad hoc, informal, and/or secret contacts are the only remaining access routes for think tanks further away from ideological control. Of course, informal communication with governments is standard practice for think tanks around the world. But the politicization of bureaucracy in de-democratization contexts makes dialogue between government officials and government-critical experts unattainable, even at lower levels in the bureaucratic and political hierarchy, unless kept secret.

Dismantling accountability

Finally, lack of accountability and responsiveness to constituencies is a fundamental aspect of de-democratization (Batory & Svensson, 2019; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2021), raising an additional barrier

to external policy advice. This may be done by reducing “social participation and responsibilities...vis-à-vis...external controls, cutting back transparency” (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 14) and restricting media access. Another strategy is the downgrading of parliamentary power and other representative modes of accountability and their replacement with direct and justificatory referenda, along with the control and de-legitimization of judiciary powers (Sata & Karolewski, 2020). Limiting the role of participatory and consultative modes of governance (Bartha et al., 2020; Batory & Svensson, 2019) is particularly relevant from the perspective of external policy advice because such consultation could provide alternative access points for critical expertise, but in some instances, consultation processes are completely dismantled (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). The inclusion of CSOs and knowledge producers in such truncated consultations is conditioned by ideological selectiveness. Those allowed to participate are co-opted by the government (Bakir, 2023) or their presence remains symbolic (Djordjevic & Stone, 2023).

The lack of government accountability was mentioned by government-critical interviewees. They said that regular channels of policy advice, both formal and informal, have been blocked. One example was the Ombudsman, previously a last resort for government-critical think tanks but now inactive: “The change in 2019 was a huge censure for us, because the former Ombudsman was very keen on this whole...issue and was very active. And since then, the current Ombudsman...has done nothing” (IP5_HU). The Constitutional Tribunal in Poland is used to serve as a check on the fast-tracked changes to legislation, but a Polish interviewee said, “Since 2017 we have lost one of the bodies with the help of which we could do that” (IP5_PL).

Government control of accountability platforms that used to be venues for responding to constituencies further limits access for government-critical think tanks. Even legally prescribed consultations are avoided, for example, by not issuing proposals through the government: “Often, in fact, draft laws are sent as parliamentary drafts to the parliament, which means that there is really no...debate with the admission of NGOs, councils for social dialogue, just immediately it falls into the parliament” (IP3_PL). If consultations are organized, they often come at a stage when a policy decision is already made. Indeed, consultations are used to legitimize policy proposals rather than to secure their quality. While a government-critical think tank may still speak out, it will have no effect:

Of course, we say what we think about it [policy proposals], but there is already a political decision there that they want to push through. It is very difficult to go against it at the point when there is a proposal that has been made public. (IP5_HU)

This mode of no or only superficial consultation (Khmelnitskaya, 2021) leaves little room for holding the government accountable: “Someone wrote it in the privacy of their office, and then we received it for ‘consultation.’ And in fact, there was no real possibility of influence at all” (IP19_PL).

Consultation platforms are populated in large part by government-aligned organizations (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2021), but some nonaligned groups may be invited to attend, posing serious ethical dilemmas. Despite the risk of contributing to the legitimacy of illiberal policymaking, some think tanks participate to publicly manifest their protest of particular policy proposals: “When people ask us ‘why’ [do you still participate], I always say so that no one can tell us later ‘Where were you when this was passed?’” (IP5_PL). A Hungarian colleague concurred:

This consultation mechanism has been abandoned by quite a lot of people from legal organizations, because it is pointless, as nothing happens...We had a discussion about this and concluded...that we think it is very important that we always have our voices heard on these platforms and that it is documented that we have these proposals. (IP5_HU)

Together, these trends amount to a political theater of accountability generating legitimacy for the regime (Khmelnitskaya, 2021), with no chance of having an impact on policymaking.

Discussion

Based on the literature and our interviews with 53 think tank representatives in Hungary and Poland, we identified four aspects of change in policymaking and public administration that shape PAS, particularly external policy advice in de-democratizing contexts: questioning and politicizing expertise in policymaking; moving toward a centralized, top-down, fast-paced policy process; politicizing norms

Table 1. Changes to policy processes in de-democratization and consequences for policy advice systems

Policy process	Consequence for policy advice systems
Questioning and politicizing expertise	The production, access, and use of knowledge undermined. Ideologically validated knowledge prioritized. Exclusion of expertise and experts not aligned with regime ideology.
Centralizing the policy process	Control over all external expert input and closing access for ideologically nonaligned policy advisers.
Politicizing public administration	Personalized entry points left only for ideologically aligned policy advisers. Informal entry for external expertise ideologically validated or blocked. Secret communication-only option for government-critical experts.
Dismantling accountability mechanisms	Policy advisers forced to comply or opt out from facade consultations. Consultation ideologically selective Policy advisers' function as accountability agents diminishes.

and practices of public administration; dismantling accountability mechanisms Table 1 summarizes the consequences of these changes for think tanks and external policy advice.

First, the de-legitimization of policy expertise sets the conditions of operation for PAS in de-democratizing regimes. Our interviewees suggested that facts-based policymaking is undermined by questioning the need for expertise in policy processes. When expertise is used, its validity is closely tied to its ideological embeddedness, resulting in a polarized knowledge regime where knowledge produced by think tanks aligned with government ideology is supported, while knowledge coming from outside this circle is seen as undermining the regime [Jezierska, et al., 2024](#). PAS driven by this dual logic departs from a facts-based, rationalistic model of policymaking, subordinating policy advice to ideological and regime sustainability ([Manwaring, 2019](#)). Progovernment think tanks are coproducers of government ideology and, as such, are instrumental to regime legitimation and sustainability ([Buzogány & Varga, 2018](#); [Jezierska, et al., 2024](#)). This ideologically grounded logic of policy expertise undergirds the operation of PAS in illiberal contexts and sets the direction and rationale for the other three identified aspects.

Second, the centralized, top-down, and fast-paced policy process impacts the access of think tanks to policymaking by setting up institutional practices and logics ([Manwaring, 2019](#)) that limit entry points. Third, most connections with public administration must be sanctioned by higher levels; thus, they are politically controlled and subordinated to regime logics. Informal access is also severed by politicization of public administration, making public administrators subservient to politicians and changing bureaucratic norms into a culture of loyalty to the regime ideology. In this scenario, government-aligned think tanks clearly benefit.

Fourth, dismantling accountability mechanisms results in a bifurcated landscape of think tanks where those aligning with the government are selected as consultation partners, maintaining the appearance of participatory governance, while government-critical think tanks must decide whether to take part in consultations at all, as they have no influence. Government-aligned organizations benefit, becoming pieces in the machinery legitimizing the regime with more or less autonomy to improve it. This leaves nonaligned think tanks to operate as prodemocracy advocacy organizations ([Jezierska, 2023](#)) or contribute policy expertise at transnational or local levels that are free from regime control ([Djordjevic & Stone, 2023](#)).

In Hungary and Poland, we see a polarized PAS, not the emergence of monolithic state-controlled think tanks. Policy advice is tilted toward government-aligned think tanks, but “civil” think tanks still exist ([Hayward, 2018](#)), operating within the EU framework. The availability of transnational funding, networking, and policymaking schemes is a political contextual factor ([Köllner et al., 2018](#)) that helps maintain PAS diversity.

Conclusion

In this paper, we show how examining political aspects of the demand side ([Howlett, 2019](#); [Manwaring, 2019](#)) in a contextually sensitive way contributes to understanding PAS in de-democratizing contexts.

Our analysis of think tank narratives in two de-democratizing countries demonstrates how ideational, procedural, and structural changes of policy processes impact these systems. There is a move away from even an appearance of neutrality toward a politicized and bifurcated logic that is instrumental to the ideological orientation and sustainability of de-democratizing governments. Our data help disentangle how such changes are conducive to downplaying, reconfiguring, and controlling the production and role of expert knowledge in policy processes. Importantly, in Hungary and Poland, the absence of a fully developed, transparent, and professional public administration before the turn toward de-democratization (Hajnal et al., 2021) made their think tanks more vulnerable.

Our analysis shows the intricate links between the demand and supply sides of policy advice (Howlett, 2019). The politicization of demand redefines the larger policy advisory system, thereby influencing the role and operations of think tanks. The four aspects of change in policymaking that we identify illustrate different ways to control and screen policy advice to serve the state's ideological and sustainability objectives. Think tanks aligned with government ideology have more entry points, more resources, and some policy impact, while those opposing the government have their access to decision-makers blocked. At first glance, the patterns do not diverge significantly from those in liberal democratic contexts. Yet, the shifting status of policy-related knowledge and the ideologically validated narrowing of entry options at every level of the policy process signal a more systematic and general marginalization of facts- and expertise-based policymaking logic.

Our findings differ from those of prior literature on think tanks in autocracies. We find that government-critical think tanks in Hungary and Poland may be curtailed by de-democratization, but they still occupy a significant place in the public sphere. Critical knowledge production is attacked but not fully blocked, and nonaligned think tanks still have access to decision-makers, even though it mostly takes the form of secret communication. Hungary and Poland until 2023 are transitioning toward autocracy, but they operate in the specific context of the EU. In these two countries, regime control is strong but not omnipotent, allowing a diversity of think tank voices and activities.

Our conceptual framework builds on prior scholarship combined with interview data. Rather than claiming universal applicability, however, we suggest the framework be tested in different contexts and with more diverse data, not only in nondemocratic contexts but also in comparative liberal vs. illiberal contexts. This could be particularly important given the increasing number of stable democracies threatening to autocratize. More research is required to assess the consequences of the changes we have identified, especially think tanks' development of modes of accommodation. Analysis could extend to pinpointing sectoral differences; our data indicate differences in the magnitude of change across sectors, although the direction of change does not seem to differ. Finally, a more detailed assessment of the content and impact of policy advice by progovernment actors would be useful (Goyal & Saguin, 2019), but given the secretive nature of de-democratizing regimes, such research would require privileged access.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for the financial support of The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (grant number 6/19) and for generous feedback from participants in a workshop on Policy Advice in Democratizing and Undemocratic Contexts, which we organized in Gothenburg in 2021, with funding from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, and participants of the 2022 IPPA workshop Policy Design in the Face of Malignancy and Malicious Policy-Making Behavior convened by Tim Legrand and Jae Moon. We are also grateful to Dorottya Fekete for outstanding research assistance throughout the project, especially for organizing data for this paper.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Appendix 1 Composition of the sample and interviews

Composition of the sample

At the time of data gathering (2020–2021), there were 70 think tanks in Poland and 68 in Hungary. Following our definition of “think tanks” (see the article), our sample includes not only organizations

Table 2. Sample variation.

Hungary = N17			
Organizational age	Established before 2010		Established after 2010
	9		8
Organizational size	<10 employees		>10 employees
	8		9
Position toward government	Supportive		Critical
	10		7
Ideological stance	Progressive	(Neo)liberal	Conservative
	7	3	7
Poland = N24			
Organizational age	Established before 2015		Established after 2015
	19		5
Organizational size	<10 employees		>10 employees
	11		13
Position toward government	Supportive		Critical
	8		16
Ideological stance	Progressive	(Neo)liberal	Conservative
	4	11	9

self-identifying as think tanks but also private research organizations, advocacy organizations with a substantial research component, and government-based research organizations, which may not see themselves as think tanks. We selected 41 think tanks for the study, 17 from Hungary and 24 from Poland. Since some interviewees conditioned their participation on the anonymization not only of their names but also of the names of the think tanks they belonged to, we anonymized the whole sample. [Table 2](#) presents the sample in an aggregated form, grouping the interviewed think tanks in various ways, helping us keep the informed consent promise while showcasing the diversity of our sample. While no firm representativity can be claimed, we made maximum effort to ensure that we included a broad range of think tank experiences. We included think tanks of varied organizational ages (established before 2010–2015 and after) and size (less or more than 10 employees), variously positioned with respect to the government (supportive, critical), and taking various ideological stances [progressive, (neo)liberal, conservative]. They covered a broad range of policy areas, with most covering 3–5 policy areas.

Interviews

Our data comprise 53 semistructured interviews with key think tank representatives, most commonly the founder or director. Interviews were conducted in two rounds: a first round in Hungarian or Polish (one in English) in 2021 with all 41 organizations and a second round with 12 selected think tanks in English in 2022. Interviews were mostly conducted via videoconferencing. Questions in the first round referred to think tanks' policy influence, relations with other actors, and the changing context since 2010. Questions in the second round focused on the 2022 Parliamentary elections and polarization in Hungary and on judicial independence and relations with the EU in Poland. The average interview length was one and a half hours. All Hungarian interviewees requested anonymity; therefore, we removed information revealing identity. Interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed with Nvivo-based qualitative coding.

Appendix 2 Illustrative examples of quotations for aspects of change in policy process

Changes to policy processes		Interview excerpts
Questioning and politicizing expertise	Decreasing demand for policy advice and expert knowledge	<p>“Polish politicians don’t value knowledge, they don’t think they need it” (IP11_PL).</p> <p>“There is a remarkable shift towards a kind of politics-dictated direction, where professional considerations do not even appear even when they could be compatible with politics” (IP1_HU).</p> <p>“The Hungarian decision-making process has been terribly closed off [...] they do not even attend EU organized professional conferences [...] They don’t give us interviews when we’re writing something for the EU and we’re supposed to be documenting what the Hungarian situation is” (IP1_HU).</p> <p>“[In the 1990s] everyone was still polite to us and when we spoke, they listened. In fact, it is quite unbelievable that there were times when people were not only listened to, but even asked questions” (IP11_HU).</p> <p>“We feel a certain frustration in the field of our scientific work, that in general it is difficult to do such evaluations in Poland, because you do not have access to the various administrative data that exist, you see that this policy is done in the dark” (IP6_PL).</p>
	Reconfiguration of expertise along ideological lines	<p>“Hungarian decision-making preparation has largely become trust-based. So ‘our’ people have the say and everybody else is the enemy” (IP1_HU).</p> <p>“Obviously, the politician will always go to the organization that he or she trusts to do research or analysis for them or to help them with their work” (IP12_HU).</p> <p>“Our alter ego is built on the other side, well these are more GON-GOs than NGOs. [...] This new civil society, which is being built at the moment by those currently in power, is being fed in an absolutely incredible way from state budget funds” (IP5_PL).</p> <p>“If someone does not agree with the government policy, it is difficult to obtain financing from such an entity” (IP15_PL).</p> <p>“There is an attitude of listening. We think that in general the role of experts has increased” (IP16_PL).</p> <p>“[The government] takes into account what we say [...] We have very productive, concrete, very important conversations where we say what the biggest problems are based on current research or our own experience [...] So, we certainly have an impact.” (IP10_HU)</p>
	Attack on government-critical think tanks and CSOs/support for aligned think tanks	<p>“[The attacks do not engage in a substantive debate, instead, they amount to] reputation attacks” (IP8_PL).</p> <p>“Our professionalism has never been questioned. Whenever we have been attacked by the government, it has always been politically motivated and never targeted our professional activities” (IP14_HU).</p> <p>“Just to reveal that we are all ‘agents of Soros and Gyurcsány’” (IP1_HU).</p> <p>“Under [name of think tanker], there are more than 100 people who work to provide these services [...] for the whole government. It’s running on a big scale [...] it’s an exaggeration to say they’ve monopolized the market, but they’ve become very big players [...]. It never used to be that such huge sums of money flowed through think tanks as the government is now pouring through xxx [...] but maybe also yyy” (IP15_HU).</p>

(continued)

(Continued)

Changes to policy processes		Interview excerpts
Centralizing the policy process	Using think tank materials as post hoc justification for past decisions	<p>“The political class and the state shaped in such a way have a demand for PR knowledge and research creating spin, in order to achieve electoral effectiveness” (IP11_PL).</p> <p>“[Pro-government think tanks act as] decision-selling institutes [...] looking for supporting background material for existing policies” (IP11_HU).</p>
	Extraordinary pace of policy making process	<p>“They are still running as quick as a flash and, in general, people are not able to realize in which legal order they live, because these regulations change so quickly” (IP13_PL).</p> <p>“Decision-making has become terribly ad hoc and primitive in terms of policy or professionalism” (IP1_HU).</p>
	Controlling who has access to policy making process and favoring in-house expertise	<p>“There is an incredible centralization of media monitoring, political analysis, policy advice, and public opinion research on the government side” (IP15_HU).</p> <p>“We are a background institution of the ministry. This means that we are mostly involved in preparing current policy decisions and measuring the impact of decisions already taken [...]. We are a piece of the machinery” (IP13_HU).</p> <p>“The more technical a topic, the easier it was to attract them [government officials]” (IP1_PL).</p> <p>“Areas that are very politicized are very closed. Others are much more open. [...] if it is not at the center of their policy, then they will perceive criticism as criticism and there is a possibility that they incorporate it” (IP8_HU).</p>
Politicizing public administration	Reshuffling of personnel and the politicization of personal relations	<p>“Personal relations in general have a huge influence in Poland, including Polish think tanks, on the way organizations, institutions and such likes operate” (IP11_PL).</p> <p>“It didn't really matter if you were Századvég or Political Capital. Back then, they absolutely worked, and the personal relationships were very different” (IP14_HU).</p> <p>“In bureaucracy in general [...] you have to find the right person first [...] So it is very important to find someone who you have already convinced, someone who likes me personally and thinks our subject is a good one [...] this personal contact is very important, where there is none, all attempts are bound to be in vain” (IP10_HU).</p> <p>“It means that this, so to speak, ‘fight’ is getting worse along with the progress of construction of a ‘Law and Justice state.’ So, these officials are more and more, I would say, frightened. And they are reluctant to go beyond their comfort zone, where the situation is predictable, and nobody will ask them difficult questions” (IP1_PL).</p> <p>“There were some connections [...] but now they completely died. Even our informal connections. In the beginning, I personally had university classmates in ministries or right-wing analysis institutes” (IP14_HU).</p> <p>“Until 2015, 2016, these channels practically worked. We've been called to the ministry to give our opinion, as well as to the police. These, which did not reach the level of high politics, worked. And then [...] they slowly made this anti-human rights, anti-civil society communication so powerful that it was very difficult to maintain this professional dialogue even at the lower level” (IP5_HU).</p> <p>“[Experts working for think tanks] who are not published on the website, because they are public administration employees, but [...] they are important for the reason that these are the people who have access to such insider knowledge, which they share with us, well, and often we have an insight into the state from their side” (IP3_PL).</p>

(continued)

(Continued)

Changes to policy processes		Interview excerpts
	Increased secrecy	<p>“They send over materials informally now to give our opinion, but secretly. They send it over, we give our opinion, but nothing in the file will indicate that we talked about it” (IP5_HU).</p> <p>“It can only work at that level, where we talk informally and say something, and they say we are absolutely right, but we cannot go any further than that level” (IP7_HU).</p>
Dismantling accountability	Controlling the operations of accountability platforms	<p>“The change in 2019 was a huge censure for us, because the former Ombudsman was very keen on this whole [...] issue and was very active. And since then, the current Ombudsman... did nothing” (IP5_HU).</p> <p>“In 2016 the Constitutional Tribunal was still operating, and since 2017 we have lost one of the bodies with the help of which we could do that” (IP5_PL).</p>
	Undermining the consultation process	<p>“Often, in fact, draft laws are sent as parliamentary drafts to the parliament, which means that there is really no [...] debate with the admission of NGOs, councils for social dialogue, just immediately it falls into the parliament and sometimes is there, in quotation marks, ‘grinding’ for a few days” (IP3_PL).</p> <p>“Of course, we say what we think about it [policy proposals], but there is already a political decision there that they want to push through. It is very difficult to go against it at the point when there is a proposal that has been made public” (IP5_HU).</p> <p>“Someone wrote it in the privacy of their office, and then we received it for ‘consultation.’ And in fact, there was no real possibility of influence at all...” (IP19_PL).</p> <p>“This consultation mechanism has been abandoned by quite a lot of people from legal organizations, because it is pointless, as nothing happens. And also, because the government has taken an offensive approach to NGOs. We had a discussion about this and concluded [...] that we think it is very important that we always have our voices heard on these platforms and that it is documented that we have these proposals” (IP5_HU).</p> <p>“When people ask us ‘why’ [do you still participate], I always say so that no one can tell us later ‘Where were you when this was passed?’” (IP5_PL).</p>

References

- Abelson, D. E. (2002). *Do think tanks matter? Assessing the impact of public policy institutes*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Axyonova, V. (2024). Responding to crises in authoritarian environments: Russian think tanks between policy evaluation and state endorsement. *Review of Policy Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12601>
- Bacon, E. (2018). Policy change and the narratives of Russia's think tanks. *Palgrave Communications*, 4(94), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0148-y>
- Bakir, C. (2023). The vicious circle of policy advisory systems and knowledge regimes in consolidated authoritarian regimes. *Policy and Society*, 42(3), 419–439. <https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puad013>
- Bartha, A., Boda, Z., & Szikra, D. (2020). When populist leaders govern: Conceptualizing populism in policy making. *Politics and Governance*, 8(3), 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i3.2922>
- Batory, A., & Svensson, S. (2019). The use and abuse of participatory governance by populist governments. *Policy & Politics*, 47(2), 227–244. <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557319X15487805848586>
- Bauer, M. W., Peters, B. G., Pierre, J., Yesilkagit, K., & Becker, S. (2021). Introduction. In M. W. Bauer, B. G. Peters, J. Pierre, K. Yesilkagit & S. Becker (Eds.), *Democratic backsliding and public administration: How populists in government transform state bureaucracies* (pp. 1–22). Cambridge University Press.
- Boese, V. A., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Sato, Y., & Lindberg, S. I. (2022). State of the world 2021: Autocratization changing its nature? *Democratization*, 29(6), 983–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2069751>
- Buzogány, A., & Varga, M. (2018). The ideational foundations of the illiberal backlash in Central and Eastern Europe: The case of Hungary. *Review of International Political Economy*, 25(6), 811–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2018.1543718>
- Campbell, J., & Pedersen, O. (2015). Policy ideas, knowledge regimes and comparative political economy. *Socio-Economic Review*, 13(4), 679–701. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwv004>
- Carothers, T., & Brechenmacher, S. (2014). *Closing space: Democracy and human rights support under fire*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Christensen, D., & Weinstein, J. M. (2013). Defunding dissent: Restrictions on aid to NGOs. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(2), 77–91. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0026>
- Craft, J., & Halligan, J. (2017). Assessing 30 years of Westminster policy advisory system experience. *Policy Sciences*, 50(1), 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-016-9256-y>
- Craft, J., & Wilder, M. (2017). Catching a second wave: Context and compatibility in advisory system dynamics. *Policy Studies Journal*, 45(1), 215–239. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12133>
- De Wilde, P., & Zürn, M. (2012). Can the politicization of European integration be reversed? *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 50(s1), 137–153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2011.02232.x>
- Djordjevic, I., & Stone, D. (2023). 'State captured' policy advice? Think tanks as expert advisors in the Western Balkans. *Policy and Society*, 42(3), 334–346. <https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puad021>
- Ekiert, G., Kubik, J., & Vachudova, M. A. (2007). Democracy in the post-communist world: An unending quest? *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 21(1), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325406297170>
- Enyedi, Z. (2016). Paternalist populism and illiberal elitism in Central Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21(1), 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1105402>
- Fischer, F. (2019). Knowledge politics and post-truth in climate denial: On the social construction of alternative facts. *Critical Policy Studies*, 13(2), 133–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2019.1602067>
- Fraussen, B., & Halpin, D. (2017). Think tanks and strategic policy-making: The contribution of think tanks to policy advisory systems. *Policy Sciences*, 50(1), 105–124. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-016-9246-0>
- Garsten, C., & Sörbom, A. (2023). Discreet Diplomacy. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 41, 98–117. <https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2023.410108>
- Goyal, N., & Saguin, K. (2019). Capacity, control, and content: The supply of think tank policy advice in India. *Policy Studies*, 40(3–4), 337–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2018.1557624>
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2021). *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge.
- Gurieff, S., & Treisman, D. (2020). A theory of informational autocracy. *Journal of Public Economics*, 186, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104158>
- Hajnal, G., & Boda, Z. (2021). Illiberal transformation of government bureaucracy. In M. W. Bauer, B. G. Peters, J. Pierre, K. Yesilkagit & E. Becker (Eds.), *Democratic backsliding, populism, and public administration* (pp. 285–325). Cambridge University Press.

- Hajnal, G., Jeziorska, I., & Kovács, É. M. (2021). Understanding drivers of illiberal entrenchment at critical junctures: Institutional responses to COVID-19 in Hungary and Poland. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 87(3), 612–630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852320981138>
- Halligan, J. (1995). Policy advice and the public service. In B. G. Peters & D. Savoie (Eds.), *Governance in a changing Environment* (pp. 138–172). McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Hayward, J. (2018). The rise of China's new-type think tanks and the internationalization of the state. *Pacific Affairs*, 91(1), 27–47. <https://doi.org/10.5509/201891127>
- Hernando, M. G., Pautz, H., & Stone, D. (2018). Think tanks in 'hard times' – the global financial crisis and economic advice. *Policy and Society*, 37(2), 125–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2018.1487181>
- Howlett, M. (2019). Comparing policy advisory systems beyond the OECD: Models, dynamics and the second-generation research agenda. *Policy Studies*, 40(3–4), 241–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2018.1557626>
- Hustedt, T. (2019). Studying policy advisory systems: Beyond the Westminster-bias? *Policy Studies*, 40(3–4), 260–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2018.1557627>
- Jezierska, K. (2018). Performing Independence. The Apolitical Image of Polish Think Tanks. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70, 345–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1447648>
- Jezierska, K. (2023). Coming out of the liberal closet. Think tanks and de-democratization in Poland. *Democratization*, 30, 259–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2130259>
- Jezierska, K., Krizsán, A. & Sörbom, A. 2024 (De)Polarization Entrepreneurs? Think Tanks and Pernicious Polarization in Central Europe Perspectives on Politics 1–16 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001397>
- Jezierska, K. & Sörbom, A. (2021). Proximity and distance: Think tanks handling the independence paradox. *Governance*, 34, 395–411. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12503>
- Khmel'nitskaya, M. (2021). Socio-economic development and the politics of expertise in Putin's Russia: The 'hollow paradigm' perspective. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73(4), 625–646. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1853680>
- Kofman, A. (2018). *Bruno Latour, the post-truth philosopher, mounts a defense of science*. New York Times, October 25. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>
- Köllner, P., Zhu, X., & Abb, P. (2018). Understanding the development of think tanks in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan. *Pacific Affairs*, 91(1), 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.5509/20189115>
- LibertiesEU. (2017). Joint statement on the Hungarian NGO Law. <https://www.liberties.eu/en/news/joint-statement-lexngo-hungary/12429>
- Lindquist, E. (2021). Think tanks and policy communities: Analysing policy influence and learning from the analogue to the digital era. In D. E. Abelson & C. J. Rastrick (Eds.), *Handbook on think tanks in public policy* (pp. 100–118). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Lindquist, E. A. (1993). Think tanks or clubs? Assessing the influence and roles of Canadian policy institutes. *Canadian Public Administration*, 36(4), 547–579. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-7121.1993.tb00833.x>
- Manwaring, R. (2019). Political demand and policy advice: A framework for analysis. *Policy Studies*, 40(3–4), 270–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2018.1557622>
- Mazur, S. (2021). Public administration in Poland. In M. W. Bauer, B. G. Peters, J. Pierre, K. Yesilkagit & S. Becker (Eds.), *Democratic backsliding, populism, and public administration* (pp. 100–126). Cambridge University Press.
- McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576>
- Medvetz, T. (2012). *Think tanks in America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Menegazzi, S. (2021). Chinese think tanks and public diplomacy in the Xi Jinping era. *Global Society*, 35(3), 373–394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2020.1825067>
- Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Pierre, J., Peters, B., Bauer, M., Becker, S., & Yesilkagit, K. (2021). Conclusions: Public administration under the rule of democratic backsliders. In M. Bauer, B. Peters, J. Pierre, K. Yesilkagit & S. Becker (Eds.), *Democratic backsliding and public administration: How populists in government transform state bureaucracies* (pp. 267–284). Cambridge University Press.
- Pirro, A. L. P., & Stanley, B. (2021). Forging, bending, and breaking: Enacting the 'illiberal playbook' in Hungary and Poland. *Perspectives on Politics*, 20(1), 86–101. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001924>

- Poppe, A. E., & Wolff, J. (2017). The contested spaces of civil society in a plural world: Norm contestation in the debate about restrictions on international civil society support. *Contemporary Politics*, 23(4), 469–488. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1343219>
- Pospieszna, P., & Vetulani-Cęgiel, A. (2021). Polish interest groups facing democratic backsliding. *Interest Groups and Advocacy*, 10(2), 158–180. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00119-y>
- Rich, A. (2004). *Think tanks, public policies and politics of expertise*. Cambridge University Press.
- Roggeband, C & Krizsán, A. (2021). The Selective Closure of Civic Space. *Global Policy*, 12, 23–33. [10.1111/1758-5899.12973](https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12973)
- Sata, R., & Karolewski, I. P. (2020). Caesarean politics in Hungary and Poland. *East European Politics*, 36(2), 206–225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1703694>
- Scheppele, K. L. (2018). Autocratic legalism. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 85(2), 545–583.
- Stone, D. (2013). *Knowledge actors and transnational governance: The private-public policy nexus in the Global Agora*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sunnercrantz, L., & Yildirim, T. M. (2022). The role of experts in populist politics: Toward a post-foundational approach. In H. Eslen-Ziya & A. Giorgi (Eds.), *Populism and science in Europe* (pp. 43–65). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory*, 30(3), 167–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914>
- Toepler, S., Zimmer, A., Fröhlich, C., & Obuch, K. (2020). The changing space for NGOs: Civil society in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. *Voluntas*, 31(4), 649–662. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00240-7>
- Vesely, A. (2013). Externalization of policy advice: Theory, methodology and evidence. *Policy and Society*, 32(3), 199–209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2013.07.002>
- Weaver, R. K. (1989). The changing world of think tanks. *Political Science & Politics*, 22(3), 563–578. <https://doi.org/10.2307/419623>
- Wellstead, A. M., & Howlett, M. (2022). (Re)thinking think tanks in the age of policy labs: The rise of knowledge-based policy influence organisations. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 81(1), 224–232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12528>
- Zhang, D. (2021). The media and think tanks in China: The construction and propagation of a think tank. *Media Asia*, 48(2), 123–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2021.1899785>
- Zhu, X. (2009). The influence of think tanks in the Chinese policy process: Different ways and mechanisms. *Asian Survey*, 49(2), 333–357. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2009.49.2.333>
- Zhu, X. (2020). Think tanks in politically embedded knowledge regimes: Does the “revolving door” matter in China? *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 86(2), 295–315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852318776362>